

FISH AND WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

Meeting Date: August 11, 2016

Agenda Item: Keogh Ranch Conservation Easement Addition

Division: Wildlife

Action Needed: Final

Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation: 5 Min

◆-----◆

Background: Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks (FWP) proposes to purchase a conservation easement on a 41-acre in-holding that lies in the middle of the existing Keogh Conservation Easement property (7,106 encumbered acres) located 15 miles north of Whitehall, MT. The in-holding used to be owned by the BLM but is now in the possession of the Fitzgerald family who also owns the land encumbered by the FWP conservation easement. The appraised value and cost of the easement is \$46,400. The Treasure State Chapter of the Mule Deer Foundation (Butte, MT) has committed to contribute \$10,000 toward the purchase. The balance of costs would be paid for through FWP's Habitat Montana Program. The in-holding would be encumbered with the same terms as the surrounding easement and managed under the same management plan.

Public Involvement Process & Results: Public comments on the proposed action were accepted for 30 days (through June 24, 2016). Legal notices were printed in the *Montana Standard* (Butte) and the *Whitehall Ledger*. The EA was also posted on the FWP webpage: <http://fwp.mt.gov/publicnotices/>.

This project has been discussed with the Jefferson Valley Sportsmen Association and copies of the EA were sent to adjacent landowners and several other interested parties. Three comments were received, all in support of the proposed action. A decision notice in support of the proposed action was signed by the Region 3 Supervisor on June 30, 2016.

Alternatives and Analysis: Two alternatives were considered: 1) FWP purchases a conservation easement on the 41-acre in-holding to the Keogh Ranch Conservation Easement; 2) FWP does not purchase an easement on the in-holding. Proceeding with the proposed action would assure this land continues to provide valuable wildlife habitat and recreation access while also maintaining the land as part of a traditional agricultural operation.

Agency Recommendation & Rationale: The department recommends proceeding with the purchase of a conservation easement to conserve this parcel consistent with the remainder of the ranch. This would assure the conservation values are maintained on the parcel and the adjacent conserved habitats.

Proposed Motion: I move the Commission approve completion of this addition to the Keogh Ranch Conservation Easement.